

Wook-kyung Choi, who was born in 1940 and passed away at the early age of 45, lived and worked in the United States for nearly fifteen of her twenty-year career as a professional artist. Her American years, divided into two periods, 1963-1971 and 1974-1978, are crucial, representing the period that Choi established her identity as an artist as well as her artistic style. During this period, Choi worked on a wide range of works, including abstract paintings, ink drawings and collages as well as figure drawings. In much of her work, the influence of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art is evident. Despite her acknowledged range, the exhibition *Wook-kyung Choi: American Years 1960s-1970s* focuses on her abstract paintings and collages. The exhibition also includes some undated works that are believed to belong to her American years based on extensive research and comparison.

By focusing on her American years, the show hopes to open a critical dialogue about this important artist, re-interpreting the relationship between her artistic development and oeuvre and American modern art including Abstract Expressionism. In addition, the exhibition frames the artist's works in the vital context of Korean art in the 1960s and 70s. The Korean art scene during this period was dominated by two movements; the first was the so-called Korean Avant-garde, a loosely-affiliated movement that was primarily focused on performance and installation-oriented art practices. The second was Dansaekhwa, a more conservative movement that was centered on the National Academy of Arts. In addition, Informel from Europe and Mono-ha from Japan were part of the dialogue. All were more influential than American Abstract Expressionism. As a result, Choi's interest in Abstract Expressionism was considered outdated by the Korean Avant-garde, and rejected as a "foreign" technique by the conservative artists of the day. In this respect, Wook-kyung Choi made a lasting contribution challenging orthodoxy within Korea and establishing the importance of individual practice independent from mainstream ideas. The time has come for there to be a reevaluation of Choi's prolific and meaningful practice and this exhibition is a call for a more active research and appreciation of her contribution to Korean art.

Although the artist never directly mentioned the influence of Abstract Expressionism, Choi's paintings between 1963 and 1971 reflect a deep affinity between her work and the influential post-war art movement. Abstract Expressionism, established in the 1940s, was already a dominant school in America by the time Choi began her studies in the United States. Indeed, the artist learned about Expressionism through catalogs prior to her move to the US. Despite her familiarity, Choi's impression when she first saw Jackson Pollock's painting records its profound influence on the young artist. "It was as if the painting was suggesting a certain problem that transcended space or time between the painting and the audience, beyond any school or movement. It seemed to suggest something like infinite space, unlike the emphasis on perspective found in the Renaissance or that seen in Cubism."¹ Choi's discovery of an infinite space in Abstract Expressionism paintings enabled her to go beyond the physical

¹ Wook-kyung Choi and Kwan-mo Jung, "American Contemporary Art and Two Exhibitions", in *Space* (January 1974), p30.

world to explore a deeper metaphysical content in her work. In this context, Choi's abstract paintings are closely related to Willem de Kooning's use of aggressive gestures to access the unconscious while also related to the infinite space created in Pollock's drip paintings. Choi's paintings are unique in the way they balance her interest in Abstract Expressionism and her own style.

Choi defined her own painting process as “dashing into the canvas to develop various situations without any conception or plan, paying attention to naturally generated, spontaneously occurring forms and what they presented, and creating order by selecting and organizing them.”² During this time Choi also continued to explore ink drawings and collages. Her black and white drawings evoke the bold lines and gestures of de Kooning, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell while her collage works reflect the influence of Rauschenberg's Combine painting and Pop Art. Although the artist reflects on everyday life in most of her collages—utilizing magazine advertisements or newspaper articles and coloring on/around these appropriations—her response to the socio-political events of the time such as racism and the anti-war movements can also be found in paintings such as *In Peace* (1968) and *Who is the Winner in This Bloody Battle?* (1968). Choi's drawings include forms that naturally emerged from her gesture, and collages evoke specific subjects in reality. Indeed, the artist constructed an infinite space in her abstract paintings by removing figures and forms, whereas, in her drawings and collages, she created a space fulfilled with observed subjects and forms.

Sungwon Kim (Artistic Director of ACC Creation)

² In *Space* (May 1985), p.39.